

VODOU

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A turning point in the Haitian saga of resistance to both physical enslavement and cultural oppression was the 1791 Bwa Kayiman Vodou ritual and political congress held near Cap François by runaway slaves (*maroons*). The gathering led to a general slave uprising, which became a war of national liberation that culminated in the proclamation of Haiti's independence on January 1, 1804. For the African captives who revolted, success was due in large measure to the cohesive force of Vodou.

Popular labeling of Vodou as "witchcraft" and "magic" has been a historical tradition among European colonialists, and Hollywood films and supermarket tabloids sustain the myths. Yet Vodou is essentially a monotheistic religion, which recognizes a single and supreme spiritual entity or God. Besides Vodou's visible cultural and ritual dimensions expressed through the arts—especially in Haitian music and dance—its teaching and belief system include social, economic, political, and practical components. Today, for example, Vodou's basic teachings are concerned with what can be done to overcome the limiting social conditions of Haiti—what to do in case of illness in a country that counts only one physician for every 23,000 people, and what to do before embarking upon major undertakings, such as marriage, business transactions, or traveling abroad. Vodou gives its adherents positive means to address these issues.

Vodou resulted from the fusion of rituals and cultural practices of a great range of African ethnic groups. In colonial Haiti, the Africans came into contact with the original inhabitants of the island, the Arawak Taino. In time, the captives would also adapt elements of indigenous ritual into their own Vodou practices. This can be observed in the Vodou practitioner's use of polished stones, considered sacred, and also in symbolic ground drawings, called *vèvè* or *sèmoni*, indispensable at all rituals. The *vèvè* are also in part the legacy of certain African ethnic groups who use them in the same manner as Haitians do: Each *lwa* has an intricate *vèvè* design that recalls its unique characteristics. (The *lwa* are the intermediaries between humans and the realm of the spirit. As spiritual entities, the *lwa* symbolize major forces and elements of nature—such as earth, water, air, fire, wind, and vegetation—as well as human sentiments and values, such as love, bravery, justice, and fidelity.)

Vodou pilgrims travel from across Haiti and from overseas to bathe in the sacred waters of Saut d'Eau (Sodo).

Photo courtesy Marc-Yves Regis, photographer

Haitian Vodou incorporated many aspects of Catholicism into its ritual as well. There are two main reasons for the appearance of Catholic elements in Vodou. The first was a simple matter of force: Colonial policies such as the Code Noir, or "Black Code," prepared in France in 1685, declared that "all slaves on our islands will be baptized" and that "the practice of all religion except Catholicism" would be forbidden. The second reason was appropriation: presented with images of Christian saints, the Africans readily recognized in them elements that appealed to their own sensibility. This phenomenon is known as syncretism, and its meaning is the subject of serious debate among Vodou scholars today: while some hold that Catholic practices were actually absorbed into Vodou, others contend that the Africans never accepted the European elements into their rituals and instead simply used the saints and Christian rituals as a cover to continue their own Vodou practices. Whether one accepts one interpretation or another, syncretism is a basic part of Haitian Vodou.

The Vodou ceremony consists of a series of songs and dances accompanied by the drums, offered in honor of the *lwa*. Through possession, an important dimension of Vodou worship, both the *lwa* and the community are affirmed. The people transcend their materiality by becoming spirits, and the spirits renew their vigor by dancing and feasting with the *chwal*, or horses, for it is said that during possession the *lwa* rides a person like a cavalier rides a horse. Equally as important, possession is a time when the *lwa* communicate in a tangible way with the people, who during such times receive the best possible answers to pressing questions.



What is the future of Vodou in Haiti and outside, in the diaspora? Haiti's 1987 constitution recognizes freedom of religion in Haiti and Vodou as the national religion of the Haitian people. Yet Vodou continues to endure ambivalent status in Haiti, for many attempts have been made to uproot it. While such purges have generally failed, they have the effect of casting doubt on its merit as a cultural practice. Nevertheless, during the past thirty years people have been practicing Vodou openly. The Haitian expatriate community, numbering over a million Haitians, includes many Vodou advocates, including respected artists and writers like Frankétienne and world-renowned musical groups such as Boukman Eksperyans, Boukan Ginen, RAM, and the Fugees.

With its decentralized structure, Vodou has been diffused throughout Haiti, growing and transforming to meet the needs of the people and the existential realities of the land. Thus Vodou, the rich cultural heritage of the Haitian people, far from being a form of superstition, remains the true source igniting and inspiring the country's artistic expressions. With its reverence for the ancestors, Vodou is the cement that binds family and community life in Haiti.

Adapted from the introduction to Phyllis Galembo, *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* (Ten Speed Press, 1998), with permission.

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A follower of Azaka, the patron deity of agriculture, wears Azaka's characteristic straw hat and bag at Saut d'Eau (Sodo). Photo courtesy Marc-Yves Regis, photographer



Music

Some say that Haiti has been in perpetual revolution for 200 years. If so, then that revolution has a soundtrack: one that began with the rattle of the Taino *caciques*; that invokes healing and fighting spirits with the drums and chants of *rada* and *petwo* in Vodou; and that continues to express the appetite for freedom through the sly double meanings (*betiz*) in the songs of Carnival and *rara*, the cathartic dance rhythms of *konpa*, the poignant country ballads of *twoubadou*, and the compelling global edge of *mizik rasin* (roots music). Haiti has proven to be fertile ground both for revolution and, irrigated by the flow of multiple cultural influences throughout its history, for bountiful harvests of musical creativity. According to Haitian ethnomusicologist Eddy Lubin:

The music of Haiti was born out of unique and dramatic circumstances. Ten years after the arrival of the conquistadors on the island, the Spanish decided to import captive Africans. After the atrocious genocide of the first inhabitants of the island, whose numbers they decimated in their rush for gold, they had to find another population of servile laborers to make the colony profitable.

One should think that music has always been present in the hell that the island of Saint-Domingue was for captive people of the time. How could the enslaved people of the island have been able to stand their condition of dehumanization otherwise? The music that would emerge from this society certainly sprang from inextricable mixtures, landscapes of varied rhythms and colors.

The music of Haiti, Lubin remarks, is a creolized music—like so much else in Haiti it is a synthesis of Taino, African, and European music created out of often violent encounters. The *guido*—a grated gourd scraped to create sound—the conch shell, and the rattle, still used in Haitian ritual music, are reminders of the music of Haiti's original Taino settlers. Their music, infused throughout the Caribbean, found willing company in the drumming vocabularies imported from West and Central Africa and perpetuated in